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ABSTRACT

In recent years, gradually increased acceptance and heightened attention have been granted to extrasensory perception (ESP) research as a legitimate branch of scientific inquiry. This research holds significant implications for education despite difficulties involved with its consideration. Extrasensory perception, an organism's apparent access to external information without the use of known senses or known means of rational inference, has been the subject of empirical research in the United States since 1927. The Parapsychological Association was accepted as a component scientific organization of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1969. Difficulties with extrasensory perception research include a lack of total replication and the popular association of the laboratory research with other less well-documented aspects of the field of parapsychology. However, enough successful replication has occurred to argue for further research. Current research findings offer broad implications for education, regarding the way in which learning is assumed to occur and regarding teacher-student communication. (Author/NRB)

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EXTRASENSORY PERCEPTION RESEARCH: DIFFICULTIES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

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Extrasensory Perception Research: Difficulties and Implications for Education

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In recent years, gradually increased acceptance and heightened attention have been granted to extrasensory perception (ESP) research as a legitimate branch of scientific inquiry. This paper describes some of the difficulties involved with consideration of this research and discusses some of the significant implications which the most widely replicated findings might hold for education.

Extrasensory perception is an organism's apparent access to external information without the use of known senses or known means of rational inference. The three types of extrasensory perception most often the focus of laboratory research experimentation are telepathy, apparent direct mind-to-mind communication; clairvoyance, apparent awareness of remote physical events; and precognition, access to information not yet determined. Empirical research in extrasensory perception began to receive attention in the United States in 1927 when Dr. Joseph B. Rhine, a biologist, founded the Duke University Parapsychology Laboratory, reporting his first experimental ESP series in 1934 with results significantly greater than chance expectation. Parapsychology, of which his studies are a part, received official recognition when in 1969 the Parapsychological Association, whose members are recognized researchers, became a component scientific organization of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Now several professional journals are devoted to publishing experimental parapsychological research and increasing numbers of colleges and universities are including in their curricula accredited courses in this field.

Attempting to evaluate the merits of extrasensory perception research is not an easy task. One major difficulty is the lack of total replication of findings. Parapsychologist Dr. John Palmer of John F. Kennedy University suggests that "any independent replication attempt by definition involves a different experimenter,....and the way in which different experimenters interact with their subjects is difficult to control but likely has a profound effect on experimental outcomes in this area." Further, parapsychologists submit that absolute repeatability should not necessarily be expected since parapsychology, like other behavioral sciences, is a probabilistic science not an absolute science. They suggest that even with valid hypotheses, a not exceptionally strong yet valid relationship is not likely to reach conventional levels of significance because of sampling variation.

Further, they point out that much successful replication has occurred. In addition to Dr. Rhine's landmark research and the many variations and replications of it, many other significant findings have been widely repeated. Among these are the highly significant precognition results obtained by Helmut Schmidt (Schmidt, 1969; Heraldsson, 1970; Honorton, 1971); Charles Honorton's extrasensory perception dream research (Krippner, Ullman, Honorton, 1971); the so-called remote viewing studies wherein the subject accurately describes distant objects and numbers (Puthoff and Targ, 1976; Bisaha and Dunne, 1977); and clairvoyance studies utilizing techniques of sensory deprivation (Honorton, 1974; Braud, 1977; Dunne, Warnock, and Bishaha, 1977). Replication of significant results has been frequent enough to convince parapsychologists that paranormal processes do occur.

[1]J. Palmer. Extrasensory perception: research findings. Advances in Parapsychological Research: Extrasensory Perception, Ed. S.Krippner. Plenum Press, N.Y., 1978.

Another major challenge to those attempting to assess the merit of extrasensory perception research is an array of related research not conducted with the traditional laboratory methods of the above studies. For example, many researchers have for the last hundred years investigated so-called "psychics" who have often conveyed highly distinct, dramatically accurate information about an anonymous subject. Some distinguished scholars of the past, such as William James with the psychic Mrs. Leonore Piper, have been convinced that within fraud-free experimental designs, highly significant results were obtained, indicative of a greater degree of ESP than ordinarily encountered in standard laboratory designs.

Several criticisms are leveled at this sort of research, including the lack of many current such studies to scrutinize and the fact that numerous psychics have been found to be perpetrating fraud. While the existence of fraud with psychics does not rule out significant fraud-free findings with them, fraud greatly diminishes observers' expectations of genuine phenomena and has generally resulted in preference for the traditional, easier to control use of automated testing procedures in the laboratory.

A further complexity confronting the observer of ESP research is the controversy associated with aspects of the broader field of parapsychology which includes in addition to ESP the study of physical mediumship, psychokinesis, the so-called "near-death" phenomena, apparitions, and other allegedly paranormal effects. Fraud and delusion are frequently associated with claims of spontaneous paranormal occurrences. Further, often the persons presented by the media as case investigators of allegedly paranormal phenomena are by no means competent researchers. Such publicity tends to result in low public respect for the field of parapsychology despite its many highly able researchers. Although laboratory ESP experimentation is a distinct aspect of the larger field of parapsychology, persons potentially interested in it often hesitate because of distrust of other aspects of the field.

Understanding the aforementioned difficulties, one is struck with the need both for more ESP research attention and with significant implications which existing ESP data seem to offer for education.

One major implication regards the way in which learning is assumed to occur. Major learning theories do not commonly allow for the possibility of an extrasensory access to information. The behaviorists view learning as the formation of associations between environmental stimuli and an organism's response. This view presents the environment as consisting of sensory-motor stimuli. If the mind is capable of receiving stimuli, incoming information, from other sources than the known senses, motor reflexes, or rational inference, then the concept of environment would need modification.

The cognitive field approach to learning posits a field of experience consisting of the sum of the learner's reactions and responses to his or her environment, the insights gained, and the subsequent rearrangement of patterns of thought. Not mentioned is the possibility that an aspect of the field of experience is the reception of extrasensory data.

Another major importance of extrasensory data is their implication for educators about the abilities of the human mind. Pointing to the potential capability of mind-to-mind communication, awareness of distant events, and access to future information before it occurs, extrasensory perception research findings suggest even vaster powers of the human mind than previously envisioned.

Classroom studies have yielded significant ESP results between teachers and students, most highly significant with younger students. One of the possible issues raised by these results is that not only are a teachers verbal statements and non-verbal communication important, but the possible impact of unspoken thoughts upon young students needs to be considered. A related question concerns the degree of impact students thoughts have upon each other and on the learning process.

Classroom research has also found that students ESP scores were more highly significant with teachers they preferred than with less well-liked teachers. A possible research question would consider whether student regard for teachers could be even more important to the learning process than currently assumed.

A general question raised for educators concerns the development of ESP. Is enhanced extrasensory perception desirable and useful? If so, parapsychological research literature yields several conditions found associated with highly significant ESP results, such as testing situations in which the subject feels a high degree of spontaneity, highly relaxed, and when fantasy, dreams, and mental imagery are viewed as potential sources of relevant information.

Whether or not ESP development seems desirable, educators are confronted by student reports of paranormal occurrences. The teachers approach to such information undoubtedly influences the way in which the student will view the experience. The orientation of educators toward allegedly paranormal experiences would seem a highly appropriate focus of research and discussion.

The above are but a few of the issues which seem to fully warrant further attention by the field of education to extrasensory perception research.

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